

Managing the Active Preschooler

By Michael N. Nelson, Ph.D.

Director, Section of Pediatric Psychology

Rush Children's Hospital-Rush Presbyterian St. Luke's Medical Center

Chicago, Illinois Tel: (312) 942-6656

1. Distraction can be used as a management tool to intercept the child's emotional outbursts preventatively. Provision of structure through indirection is probably necessary, since the child does not take well to direct confrontation and demand. Extensive verbal discussion of all activities helps a child to develop good cognitive and verbal skills. In essence, parents or other caretakers can "think out loud" for the child as they attempt to manage his thoughts and actions. Preschool-age children are quite suggestible and impulsive, and are likely to act immediately on thoughts or ideas that are planted by caretakers, especially if some direction is used and the child can be persuaded that the thoughts or activities were his own idea. Management is a full-time job for caretakers, however, and there will be little time left over for TV, phone conversations, hobbies or similar adult activities while the child is awake. The child's behavior must be monitored extremely closely and carefully at all times for preventative methods to work.
2. The child's misbehavior may be related to mild or inconsistent emotional responses from other family members when he misbehaves. Perhaps the parent or caretaker expects no better of the child, but the child himself must never perceive low expectations from those around him. If he does, he is likely to "live down" to these expectations, and misbehave all the more. "Clinical" statements of "no" need to be replaced by real emotion in response to the child's misbehavior. Vigorous emotional disapproval from a sibling or caretaker can be very effective, but the sibling or caretaker must first be rewarding. For the child, all family members who engage in "floor play" with the child should be effective disciplinarians once their reward value is sufficiently high. Finally, the system of discipline for the child must be the same for all caretakers, as inconsistent discipline can be as bad as no discipline at all.
3. Hopefully, the child will increase his involvement in sustained activities, and parents and/or siblings can join him in "floor play" where they ask to participate in an ongoing activity of the child's own choosing. For example, the child might begin to play with Matchbox or Hot Wheels cars, and might need assistance in constructing a city and roads out of blocks or other materials. If the child is joined by a parent who expresses an interest in participating or helping in some way, the child will perceive the parent as having increased reward value. Such episodes of "floor play," occurring at least twice a week for at least 20 minutes per period, can go a long way toward reducing the child's rebellious behavior at home, especially if the child is asked questions throughout the play, and is able to express his preferences (e.g., regarding the location of the fire station or the length of the "road"). Children who routinely receive such adult attention are reluctant to alienate their rewarding parents through kicking, hitting, yelling, or otherwise acting out.

4. The child's improvement of attention and cooperation will occur in direct correspondence with his increase in language and cognition. Efforts to improve his language and memory skills can be strongly encouraged. The child should be encouraged to memorize songs, rhymes, verses, etc., and to generally develop his linguistic skills with the goal of improving his vocabulary. The greater the vocabulary, the better the fluency, and the more likely a child will choose verbal communication over communication by emotion or action. Involvement in a preschool singing group or similar activity can be strongly encouraged as soon as the child is old enough to cooperate with such activities. The example of older sibling(s) or other playmates may be especially helpful here.
5. As a preschooler, the child needs to engage in a liberal amount of rough-and-tumble play and other supervised activities. Enrollment in a preschool is strongly recommended to provide the child with the social stimulation and opportunities for interaction with age-mates that he requires. At home, when the child makes overtures to an older sibling, the sibling might break-off his current activities and do a little gentle roughhousing with the child, but not just before bedtime to avoid interfering with the child's sleep. After 15 to 20 minutes or so, the child should be satisfied. Siblings should endeavor to involve the child in play activities that are age-appropriate. Playing catch, or kicking a ball back and forth are such activities, while playing with fragile toys that might easily be disturbed or broken is not appropriate. The child may not be ready to engage extensive verbal activities other than being read to, although all preschoolers enjoy being asked questions regarding their wants and interests. Parents and siblings should be encouraged to ask the preschooler questions about what he wants to do, rather than trying to control the child's every action.
6. Negative or immature behaviors should not be described in front of the child. This merely becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy if the child takes these descriptions "to heart," particularly since the child is impulsive. Thus, the child is likely to immediately act out any negative descriptions of his behavior. Alternatively, the child should begin to hear positive descriptions of his behavior, particularly involving activities that are compatible with his current problem behaviors. Thus, if the child continuously hears himself being described in new and positive ways, he may tend to develop behaviors consistent with those descriptions, particularly if sufficient direct and indirect structuring is provided to permit the child to show appropriate behavior. He often acts on impulse with guidance or structure imposed by the environment.
7. The child should be given choices as much as possible, as described in the book by Haim Ginott, "Between Parent and Child." 3-year-olds are developing "competency motivation" and need to make decisions in their everyday life. Activities cannot be supported independent of family needs, however, and Dr. Ginott provides many examples of choices that might be offered to a child among limited alternatives that are approved by adults. To the extent that the child can choose between acceptable alternatives, he will be empowered, and the provision of acceptable alternatives will permit his behavior to develop along more positive pathways.
8. Time-out should be used to manage the child's "bad" behavior. Typically children can tolerate approximately a minute of time-out per year of life, so the separations from the

family should be brief but consistent. The child cannot be allowed to escape consequences for his unfavorable behavior. And, if he breaks or spills something, he must realize the need to clean up his own mess and repair the damage that has been done with assistance as needed.

9. The child's independent behavior can be developed by helping him to finish tasks. In the child's case, however, his resistance to direction may require some creative indirect guidance by parents and other caretakers. Often, the efforts of a parent or caretaker are needed to start the child on the right path. For example, children can be encouraged to put their toys away if a caretaker shares the task. The child and parent can alternate in putting toys in the toy box. If the child chooses any task that is acceptable, he can be helped to complete it. Sometimes this simply involves moving all the couch cushions to new positions on the furniture. Preschoolers undertake the some intriguing projects!
10. The child's interest in playing with age-appropriate toys might be increased if he views his siblings playing with the same toys with some success that leads to parental praise. Children learn well through example, and siblings can provide an excellent opportunity to model the kinds of behaviors that the family wishes to reinforce at home for the child. This will require some patient cooperation from siblings.
11. Preschool gymnastics can be recommended to develop the child's ability to control himself under conditions of high arousal. Typically, the rewards are so great from group activities in such programs that children can learn to wait in line even if they are jumping up and down in anticipation and excitement. The preschool child needs to develop such capabilities, and his patience and self-control should improve as he participates in such programs.
12. Careful quantification of the child's developmental performance is recommended at some time to evaluate the child's progress. School-related abilities can be measured to some extent through a preschool screening test administered by the child's local grade school, but such testing will only identify a child scoring the upper 90% versus the lowest 10%. The child's performance may barely exceed minimal expectations of the preschool screening test, and his parents will likely desire specific information regarding the child's strengths and weaknesses to permit them to concentrate both on the most effective intervention at home, and on the choice of the most appropriate preschool or other extracurricular programs. In any event, some type of quantitative measurement of the child's performance is recommended after the child reaches the age of 3 to permit the best possible planning of his preschool activities. Even without the results of such testing, however, involvement in a 12-month program can be recommended above involvement in a short-term program, or programs that include a summer vacation if the preschooler is showing some developmental delay. Typically, preschoolers forget much of what they have learned over an extended summer vacation, and require months of review to regain lost ground. If a child lags behind age peers, he can't afford to vacation during the summer, and must instead participate in structured and educationally-oriented programs throughout the calendar year. Such involvement should continue for several years to give the child the best possible preparation for school, especially if the child was born between May and August and will be one of the youngest children in his class.

13. Many preschoolers are not developmentally ready for entry into Kindergarten at the age of 5. If testing reveals significant delay, the best management plan may involve enrollment in a “developmental Kindergarten” or similar program that provides appropriate preparation for school. Such a plan will have to be worked out with administrators at the local grade school as many school districts don’t have preschool preparation programs suitable for a 5-year-old who lags significantly behind age peers. Participation for 11 to 12 months of the year, rather than just the standard school year is recommended to help a lagging child to gain needed ground in relation to other children of the same age.